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ABSTRACT

Two participant observers evaluated the week-long camp experience of adult women in order to assess the appropriateness of participant observation research methods in the camp setting, to identify strengths and weaknesses of this method, and to develop guidelines for its use. The study was part of a larger evaluation of the 9th annual Women's Week sponsored by the Black Hawk Council of Girl Scouts in Wisconsin. Data recorded by the participant observers were systematically analyzed using qualitative procedures with the development of themes as the primary research outcome. The participant observer method was judged appropriate in the camp setting, allowing for description of complex social phenomena without disrupting camp activities. The naturalistic method provided a systematic way to look at camp phenomena, capture details, and generate ideas as data were being collected. Problems included the possibility of observer bias, the high level of skill needed to observe and record events, and the time required for data collection and analysis. Researchers and camp directors wishing to conduct this type of qualitative research should involve two observers to limit bias, use adequate sampling procedures, provide training for the observers, treat data collection and analysis activities as two separate functions, and treat conclusions as working hypotheses. (JHZ)

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PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AS A RESEARCH TECHNIQUE FOR CAMPING

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Title: Participant Observation as a Research Technique for Camping

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It is frequently difficult to quantify the outcomes of a personal experience. Researchers studying changes in behavior as a result of a camp experience have had difficulty in reducing the essence of the experience to numbers. The traditionally developed rating scales have been inadequate for documenting what really happens to people in camp situations. Thus, the need exists for viewing new paradigms of research which can be used more effectively and accurately in the camp setting. The purpose of this study was to explore the use of participant observation as a possible means for conducting studies in the camp setting.

The use of participant observation, sometimes referred to as naturalistic inquiry, phenomenological, anthropological, or ethnographic research, has become increasingly popular in recent years. This type of research paradigm is an analytical description or reconstruction of intact sociocultural scenes or groups. This naturalistic way of studying human life systematically searches for phenomenological information while

avoiding manipulation (Howe 1984). Because participant observation is qualitative in nature, the approach offers additional benefits as well as some constraints which are not evident in quantitative, rationalistic paradigms. As identified by Guba, a number of key assumptions are evident with the use of a method like participant observation:

1. The paradigm rests on the assumption that there are multiple realities that may diverge as more of reality is known. All parts of the situation are interrelated.

2. The naturalistic paradigm rests on the assumption that generalizations are not possible and that at best we can hope for a "working hypothesis" to describe phenomena. This research focuses on differences between objects as frequently as it focuses on similarities.

The method of participant observation includes the involvement of the researcher in the day-to day activities of the phenomenon which is being explored. The researcher becomes a part of the activity. Participant observation was used in this study to reach the following objectives:

To use the participation observation method in a short-term situation to assess its feasibility in an outdoor setting.

To ascertain the strengths and problems associated with participant observer research.

To develop guidelines which might be of interest to others who wish to employ this technique in camping research.

Methods Used

The purpose of the larger study which used this ethnographic method was to evaluate the camp experience of adult women participating in a one week camping experience. As particpant observers, the two researchers spent a week at the resident camp with the women observing the activities that were done. The Women's Week was sponsored by the Black Hawk Council of Girl Scouts in Wisconsin and was in its ninth year of operation.

Participant observation research includes participating as a group member while recording the actions of the group. These data were systematically analyzed using qualitative procedures with the development of themes as the primary research outcomes.

Summary of Results of the Technique

The participant observation method applied in a camp

setting appeared to have quite a number of benefits. The approach was a realistic way to look at the qualitative dimension of the camping experience. The systematic collection of data allowed for a "scientific" means of analyzing the complex data. Many phenomena which occur at camp can simply not be reduced to paper and pencil measurements. Therefore, the findings occurred independent of hypothesized outcomes. The serendipitous approach allowed anecdotes to build on anecdotes and led to new ideas concerning the camp experience. Since structured expectations in the form of hypotheses did not shape the study, the process was continually open for new ideas to emerge and evolve as more data were explored. Further, this information could be built upon year after year until a more definite description and explanation of the phenomena is found. The method is also useful in remembering details as they relate to a particular experience because the events are carefully documented by the observers. In addition, the data collection process was unobtrusive and did not interfere with the regular happenings occurring at camp.

Several problems did exist in conducting this kind of research. Observer bias was a possibility; however bias can be found in any kind of research. Practice in observing is necessary for a researcher to be a good ethnographer. When making observations the tendency is to be too general or to make too many interpretations. There is a tendency to focus on specific aspects especially at the beginning of the process, when the observing ought to be open-ended and non-specific. Interpretations of the

observations must not be made too soon. The method requires a great deal of concentration and intensity to be accurate with as little bias as possible. It is easy to get caught up in the participation and forget to observe the details of the experience. The concentration required for accurate observing can be very intense as can the need to take extensive field notes. It is necessary to have time to put the ideas together into detailed and logical notes. Further, once the data are collected, a good deal of time is required to transcribe notes and to assimilate the details into conclusions that offer a contribution to the research world.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested for researchers and camp directors wishing to conduct research using this methodology:

1. Two people should be involved in the participant observation since each can help the other in formulating more complete observations and working hypotheses. Two observers can also limit the possible bias.

2. To provide greater credibility (validity) for the research, steps should be taken to use a prolonged time at the site, use persistent observation, check out the conclusions with other

participants, use additional methods such as interviews in addition to the observations, use reference materials to cross-check the information, use purposive sampling to make sure the sample is representative of the group being studied, and continually check to see how the results of the participant observation fit with other known research findings and information.

3. To assure the dependability or stability of the data, the participant observation study should involve overlap methods when collecting the data such as interviews and studies of existing documents. The study should also be replicated and the data examined by more than one person. The data collected in the form of notes should be carefully grouped so an "outsider" could look at the data and draw the same conclusions independent of the researchers.

4. The technique needs to be practiced so that one develops skills in viewing behavior and recording the behaviors accurately. It would also be important to start with a small event and then work up to longer, more extensive studies.

5. The techniques of collecting the data and analyzing the data are two separate functions. One must work on not combining the two if the most effective research project is to be completed.

6. Prior to data collection, preliminary questions should be

decided. As data collection occurs, themes can be "teased out" and categories formed. These categories help to organize the information so conclusions and actions can be formed.

7. The researcher must remember that conclusions are based on the meanings, regularities, patterns, explanations, and causes of events. These conclusions are treated as dynamic findings that will become more explicit and grounded as further research is conducted.

Implications

The technique of participant observation applied to camping research ought to receive further exploration. It is a valuable technique because: virtually anyone can use it after training and practice, word descriptions are often more useful than numbers in describing complex social phenomena such as outcomes from camping, the technique is holistic and integrative just like the camp situation, and it allows an intuitive view to be systematized. The technique may be an important method for more fully describing the results of camping programs because it makes behavior more evident than numbers do. It also does more justice to the camping experience in explaining what happens to campers and to staff. Further, the technique can be easily combined with other techniques such as camper evaluations, parent evaluations, self-concept tests and the more quantitative measures of the experience. It allows the intuitive view of

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camping benefits to be systematized in a way which can provide useful data. The researcher is truly a participant in the experience and not simply objectifying the participants. The research experience is meant to be interactive and not exploitive of the participants.

The participant observation method of research may have some very important implications for camping in the future. When qualitative methods are combined with more traditional quantitative approaches, they will provide researchers with a multi-dimensional continuum--a research "paradigm of choices" (Howe 1984). It would be important to try the method with more camping research to further assess its appropriateness and usefulness. Qualitative procedures may be the key to providing researchers interested in camping with a means for better understanding the phenomenon of camping in ways that the past quantitative research has not been able to do. Through the process of observation, description, and categorization, accurate theories that are richer in contextual and situational meaning can be provided. From these theories, camping professionals will have clearer insights into camper behavior, program goals, and administrative decision-making.

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